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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issue of violence in three settings: (1) outside the home; (2) toward a spouse; and (3) parent-to-child. The social environment dictates greater sanctions against hitting non-family people than it does for hitting family members. Also, those people who are prone to hit outside the family would be more likely to exercise violence toward their spouses and children. Conversely, those who refrain from using violence within the family would be expected to show a lower incidence of violent expression outside of the family. Data for this analysis were obtained from the 1985 National Family Violence Resurvey, which interviewed 6,002 American households by telephone using a national area probability sample. Results suggest that violence exercised toward others by male and female adults is contextual in nature. Among those men and women who have demonstrated violence toward a non-family member, the findings indicate that their tendency is toward constraint, limited usually to one of the studied settings. The traditional method for testing the trait-state theory is to measure situational variables by comparison groups and find a probability of between-group differences. The present analysis examined the behavior of the same individuals across settings to determine the level of transitivity. The hypotheses expected by trait theory were not supported. (LLL)

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# VIOLENCE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE HOME: NEW EVIDENCE FOR THE PERSON-SITUATION DEBATE[1]

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# VIOLENCE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE HOME: NEW EVIDENCE FOR THE PERSON-SITUATION DEBATE[1]

## INTRODUCTION

One of the legendary and perennial debates in social psychology grapples with the question of whether personality traits can predict behavior across varied contexts or situations (e.g., Mischel, 1968; Alker, 1972; Bem & Allen, 1974; Fiske, 1979; Schutte, et al, 1985; Kenrick and Funder, 1988). In first attempting to define a personality trait, Allport (1931) stated, "*It is not the stimulus that is the crucial determinant in behavior that expresses personality; it is the trait itself that is decisive*" (p.369). This assumption was accepted by clinical psychologists, while at the same time, constantly attacked by sociologists and behaviorists. The greatest challenge came when Mischel (1968) provided compelling arguments that correlations from most research on personality traits had too weak a yield for acceptance as evidence that traits are the driving force for behavior across situations.

The competing theories, that of personologists and social psychologists, would predict different results based on the relative strength of their theories. Personologists would expect and hope to see an identified trait express itself in consistent behaviors over several different situations. Social

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[1]This paper uses data from the "National Family Violence Resurvey" conducted by Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Straus with funding from the National Institute of Mental Health, grant MH400-27.

psychologists, including behaviorists, claim that personality is "*in the eye of the beholder*" (Jones and Nisbett, 1972) and one should look to the situational determinants for the causal variance in behavior.

The primary challenge by Mischel (1968) is that personality traits rarely exceed the +.30 correlation ceiling for expected behaviors. Although Mischel himself stated, "*There is nothing magical about a correlation coefficient..*" (p. 37), his attack on trait psychology sent the paradigm into crisis. There were many criticisms and defenses to his assertions and there have been advances in both fields of personology and social psychology since.

The fundamental question still remains: Is an individual likely to express the same behavior across diverse situations? In many instances intuition dictates that the answer is yes. For example, we would expect that the person who demonstrates charity by giving to say, the United Way and to the Salvation Army, would be more likely than a miserly person to act charitably in a third instance: buying Girl Scout cookies. Thus, we would be supporting the view of the personologists that a trait like charity extends across situations. Conversely, our same intuition tells us that people do often act contextually, responding to the opportunities of the situation. People often look toward situations like Mardi Gras as the place to conduct deviant behaviors they would not otherwise do in the absence of the festival setting.

Following in the path of this theoretical debate, and challenging the ambiguity in our own intuition, the current analysis examines the issue of violence in three settings: violence outside the home (toward a non-family member), spousal violence, and parent-to-child violence.

Violence In and Out of the Home

There exists a large body of literature that examines nearly every aspect of family violence by social scientists (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dutton, 1988; Gelles & Straus, 1988, Finklehor, 1983, Straus & Gelles, 1990; Walker, 1979). As well, there is a long history of study concerning battery committed outside the family, primarily by criminologists (e.g., Spencer, 1966; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967; and Lang, et al, 1987). According to the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (1987), an aggravated assault takes place once every 37 seconds in the United States. Despite this wide body of knowledge addressing personal violence in these separate arenas, there is very little examination of the transitivity of violence from outside the family to the inside. Straus and Hotaling (1990) suggest the answer for this may be a mystery, but it might lie in the fact that professionals generally failed recognized family violence as a criminal issue until the 70's and even now, many criminologists consider domestic assaults a personal matter and not *real* crime. Straus and Hotaling develop the argument that the two types of violence may be substantially different and the gulf between the two

disciplines of research (criminology and family sociology) may be appropriate, but bring the argument full circle by suggesting that the two disciplines (as well as related disciplines) have a great deal to offer to this area if their approaches are combined.

Violence between spouses and violence by parents toward their children was the subject of two national surveys in 1975 and 1985 (Straus and Gelles, 1986). In addition to violence among family members, the 1985 survey also included two items to determine the prevalence of violence by men and women toward non-family members. This analysis examines data from the 1985 National Family Violence Survey (NFVS) to determine the extent to which violence outside the home by husbands and wives is associated with violence inside the home.

One of the surprising findings of the 1975 survey was that women are about as violent as men in the home (Straus, 1980, p. 31). Parental violence rates were also discovered to be alarmingly high in the 1975 survey.

A long legacy of tolerance and acceptance of violence within the confines of the family has been well documented. The historical perspective of injustice concerning wife abuse is often included in books on wife battering (see for instance, Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Straus, 1980, chap. 1; Walker, 1979). The same is true for children. "*Children have been maltreated since the dawn of creation*" (Starr, 1988, p. 119). Most of the maltreatment referred to by Starr is at the hands of parents.

Violence outside the family is generally viewed as a deviant offense against society and is quickly sanctioned.

The social environment dictates greater sanctions against hitting non-family people than it does for hitting family members. When an assault occurs in public, the police are often called and arrest is common (even if no charges are later filed). On the other hand, police are not called for most incidents of domestic assault, and when they are, there is seldom an arrest.

Based on the personologists perspective about traits by psychologists, we would expect that of those people who are prone to hit outside the family (where sanctions are greater), they would also be more likely to exercise violence toward their spouses and children. Conversely, for those who restrained from using violence within the family, we expect to see a lower incidence of violent expression outside of the family.

HYPOTHESES

1) Husbands and wives who are violent toward their spouses *and* toward their children are the most likely to use violence outside of the family.

2) Those men and women who are either violent toward *only* their spouse or *only* their children are also more likely to use violence outside the family (than those who use no violence in the home).

3) Those men and women who are not violent in the home are less likely to be violent outside the home.

## METHODOLOGY

Data for this analysis was obtained from the 1985 National Family Violence Resurvey. The NFVR analysis surveyed 6002 American households by telephone using a national area probability sample. The primary instrument used in the survey was the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1990).

Subjects:

The subjects for this analysis were a subsample of the 6002 households from the 1985 NSVR. The 1251 men and 1705 women, selected by computer, were those households that had reported having at least one child, between 3 and 17 years old, living at home in the survey year.

Violence Defined:

> "*Violence is defined as an act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury to another person*" (Straus, 1988, p 15).

The CTS measures conflict tactics on three dimensions: reasoning; verbal aggression; and violence or physical aggression. The primary variables used in this analysis were all from the violence dimension. Violence was determined by a series of questions escalating from "threw something at [another person]" to "used a knife or fired a gun." (See Appendix A)

Dependent Variable:

The dependent variable in this analysis is violence expressed outside of the home. The variable is derived from two of the NFVS questions, asked once for the respondent and once for their spouse (or former spouse or partner). The question is:

*"Everyone gets angry or annoyed sometimes. How often in the last 12 months did you...*

*1) Get into a fight with someone who doesn't live here and hit the person?*

*2) Get into a fight with someone who doesn't live here and hurt that person badly enough to need to see a doctor?"*

The same response was solicited to the question, *"How often would you guess your (spouse, former spouse, partner) did that? Was it..."*

Subjects were categorized as "hit outside the family" for this analysis if they or their spouse answered once or more to either of these questions. The variable was dichotomized for this analysis.

Independent Variables:

The independent variables are: 1) Severe husband to wife violence and severe wife to husband violence as measured by the CTS; and 2) severe and very severe levels of parental violence level as measured by the CTS.

Severe violence between spouses was determined based on a sum of the items on the violence dimension of the CTS. Severe and very severe categories for physical abuse of child (parental violence) is similarly calculated, but allows for omission of the item "hit with something" because this is normatively done in our society as an acceptable form of punishment for children. The analysis measures the violence toward a single "referent" child who is randomly chosen by the interviewer.

## FINDINGS

Cross tabulations were computed to determine the percentage of subjects (husbands and wives) who used violence outside the family in each of the four cells: 1) No violence used in the

home; 2) violence used against the referent child only; 3) violence used against spouse only; and 4) violence used against both children and spouse.

The most notable result is that over three-fourths of the men and women analyzed were not violent in 1985 in the three settings studied (Table 1).

Two hundred eighty-five (22.8%) of the 1251 men surveyed reported being violent to their wives, child and/or a non-family member in the previous year (Table 3). Three hundred ninety-four (23.2%) of the 1705 women surveyed reported doing so. Men and women have nearly equal rates of spousal violence and parent-to-child violence. The only strong difference between men and women is among those who showed violence outside the family. Men are over three times as likely to fight and hit a non-family member than are women (5% for men v. 1.5% for women).

The most important result for this analysis is the small amount of men and women who were violent in two or more settings. Figure 1 illustrates the overlap in the three settings. The largest overlap for outside violence is in the setting of spousal violence. Nearly 2% of men are violent in both settings as is .7% of women. Only a fraction of 1% of men and women used violence outside the family *and* toward their children *or* in all three of the analyzed settings. Over 2% of the men and 1.5% of the women exercised violence toward their spouse and toward their child.

Percentages were also calculated to determine the likelihood

that violence would occur across settings (Table 2). For example, men who use violence outside the family have a 38% likelihood of also being violent toward their spouse, and women who fight outside the family have a 50% likelihood of demonstrating spousal violence. The smallest likelihood of transitivity was toward the referent child from those men and women who fight outside the family.

Tables 3 and 4 display the results of cross tabulations by the sex of the subject and their use of violence outside the family on their use of violence toward their spouse and toward their child.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the current study suggest that violence exercised toward others by male and female adults is contextual in nature. Among those men and women who have demonstrated violence toward a non-family member, the findings indicate that their tendency is toward constraint, limited usually to one of the studied settings.

The traditional method for testing the trait-state theory is to measure situational variables by comparison groups and find a t or F probability of between-group differences (Funder & Ozer, 1983). The present analysis examined the behavior of the same individuals across settings to determine the level of transitivity. The hypotheses expected by trait theory were not supported.

The present analysis is extremely limited in ability to

resolve the person-situation debate. Although no specific trait is identified in this analysis, the study of violence toward others does provide a relevant behavior that warrants our attention. Our interest lies in the questions about interpersonal violence: Are the spouses of those who exercise violence toward non-family members at greater risk of assault than those who are not violent outside the family? Are the children at greater risk? Is interpersonal violence a personality trait that crosses these environments or is violence constrained by the setting?

The implications of these results call for further study. Policy for both the criminal punishment and treatment of offenders relies on the outcome. Although good sense dictates that the foundation for interpersonal violence will be found in interaction between the contextual and personality variables, resolving which of the two carries the greatest strength will add tremendously to our understanding and response.

Table 1. Percentages and frequencies of men and women who hit in each category.

| | Men (n=1251) | Women (n=1705) |
|---|---|---|
| No violence | 77.2% | 76.8% |
| Violence toward spouse | 12.4 | 13.3 |
| Violence toward child | 12.5 | 11.2 |
| Violence outside the family | 5.0 | 1.5 |
| Violence toward spouse & child | 2.2 | 1.5 |
| Violence outside and to spouse | 1.9 | .7 |
| Violence outside & to child | *[a] | *[a] |
| Violence toward spouse/child/outside | *[a] | *[a] |
| Violence outside only[b] | 2.8 | .7 |
| Violence toward child only[c] | 10.0 | 9.6 |
| Violence toward spouse only[d] | 7.1 | 11.0 |

[a] These values represent less than .23% of the total cases.
[b] These are men and women whose reported violence was toward a non-family member (outside the family) exclusively.
[c] These are men and women whose reported violence was toward their child exclusively.
[d] These are men and women whose reported violence was toward their spouse exclusively.

Figure 1. MEN.

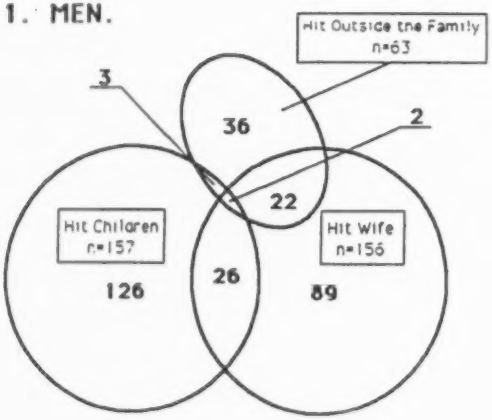


Figure 2. WOMEN.

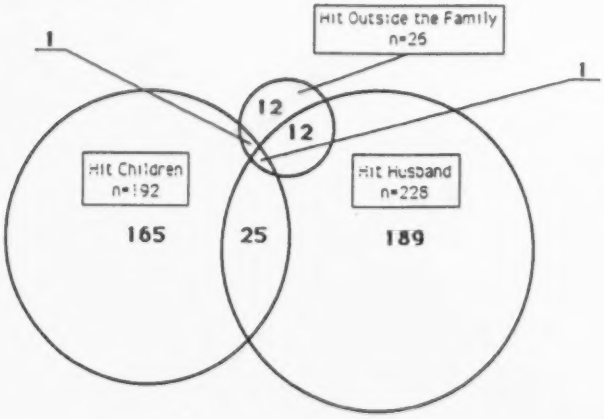

Table 2. Likelihood of men and women who use violence in one category to also use violence in other categories.

Likelihood of those are:

| | Men | | Women | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | (n) | % | (n) |
| Violent outside the family who will also be violent to their spouse | 38.0 | (63) | 50 | (26) |
| Violent to their child who will also be violent to their spouse | 17.8 | (157) | 13.5 | (192) |
| Violent to their spouse who will also be violent to their child | 17.9 | (156) | 11.4 | (228) |
| Violent to their spouse who will also be violent outside the family | 15.4 | (156) | 5.7 | (228) |
| Violent outside the family who will also be violent to their child | 7.9 | (63) | 7.7 | (26) |
| Violent to <u>both</u> their spouse and child who will also be violent outside the family | 7.1 | (63) | 3.8 | (26) |
| Violent outside the family who will also be violent to <u>both</u> their spouse and child | 3.1 | (63) | 3.8 | (26) |
| Violent toward their child who will also be violent outside the family | 3.1 | (157) | 1.0 | (192) |

Table 3. Violence by men outside of the family by husband to wife violence and parental violence (n=1251).

| Husband to Wife Violence | Parent-to-Child Violence | |
|---|---|---|
| | Absent | Present |
| | % | % |
| Absent | 3.7 | 2.3 |
| (n) | (966) | (129) |
| Present | 17.1 | 7.1 |
| (n) | (128) | (28) |

Table 4. Violence by women outside of the family by wife to husband violence and parental violence (n=1705).

| Wife to Husband Violence | Parent-to-Child Violence | |
|---|---|---|
| | Absent | Present |
| | % | % |
| Absent | 0.9 | 0.7 |
| (n) | (1311) | (166) |
| Present | 7.9 | 3.5 |
| (n) | (202) | (26) |

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